

E-waste piles up problems in Palmyra

By Todd McHale, Burlington County Times Staff Writer
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PALMYRA — Borough officials were talking trash Monday night.

Specifically, problems associated with the collection of bulk trash and electronic waste.

Given restrictions on the disposal of televisions, computers and other electronics, the borough wants to get the word out to residents that those items will not be collected.

Burlington County officials have placed much of the blame for the increase in electronic waste dumping on Gov. Chris Christie and the state Legislature's inability to agree on legislation to revamp New Jersey's electronics law to address complaints from towns and counties that it's no longer effective.

The state has prohibited televisions, computers and other devices from being disposed of in landfills since 2008 because of lead and other harmful substances they contain. Manufacturers of televisions and other electronics are required to pay for the recycling of their share of the discarded equipment, determined by a formula based on their share of calculated returns.

Borough Administrator John Gural said even though the municipality hasn't collected televisions and other electronic items for years and formalized the policy in 2013, some still haven't gotten the message.

On Monday, 14 televisions were left at the curb for bulk pickup, despite a ban on throwing those items out.

"We don't have the ability to collect and store them," Gural said of electronic waste. "We don't have a (New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection)-approved facility, and we cannot take them to the landfill."

Palmyra became the latest governing body looking into the matter.

Last month, Burlington County aired a public service announcement featuring Sheriff Jean Stanfield warning residents to stop illegally dumping televisions, computers and other electronics.

Illegal dumping of electronic waste, also known as e-waste, has become a growing problem in the county, as municipalities have been forced to drop their free e-waste recycling programs because of added expenses.

"The (Burlington) County Resource Recovery Complex increased the fee for municipalities to drop off televisions, computer monitors and things of that sort from \$30 to \$100 per unit," Gural said.

It's a hike the borough, like other towns, can no longer absorb.

"At \$100 apiece, we absolutely cannot do this," Mayor Michelle Arnold said.

Counties and recyclers have complained that the state formula no longer reflects actual recycling costs, and is causing many recyclers to refuse to retrieve the items from county or municipal drop-off sites without charging a fee.

The Legislature sent a reform law to Christie in January at the end of the two-year legislative session, but he declined to sign it, a maneuver known as a pocket veto.

Christie never specified why he did not sign the measure, but he has said lawmakers should have approved many of the dozens of bills sent to him during the final weeks of the session earlier so he could have more time for review before deciding whether to sign or veto them.

The reform legislation was reintroduced in the current session and was approved by the Senate in March. It is still pending in the Assembly, which is not scheduled to meet until the fall.

In the meantime, residents in Palmyra and elsewhere should not expect an annual electronic waste collection locally anytime soon with all the restrictions in place.

"In the past, we sponsored e-waste drop-off events one Saturday per year so residents could properly dispose of their old TVs and computer monitors, but even that service is now in jeopardy given the strict laws," Arnold said.

Beyond the costs, the borough can run into trouble if it takes the items to the dump.

"These items are banned by law from landfills, and we run the risk of being surcharged or even having our trash loads rejected," Gural said.

The borough wants to alert the public and even is considering putting together a trash committee to discuss the matter further.

"We have to find a mechanism to educate the residents and give them the information they need, and just to make them aware that putting the televisions on the curb is not going to make them disappear," Arnold said.

The municipality recommends that residents take their items to the county's recycling center in Mansfield, which will take up to two televisions or monitors at no cost.

But the borough and others believe it's time to resolve the issue statewide.

"The state needs to properly address e-waste once and for all," Gural said. "The situation is more volatile than it needs to be, and our residents and businesses deserve common-sense answers to their recycling needs. It's not like the authorities couldn't see this coming — Best Buy and the big-box stores certainly aren't selling less flat screens than the old days."